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ABSTRACT

The 12 items in this annotated bibliography on absenteeism are entries in the ERIC system. The publications cited focus on attendance policies and techniques for reducing truancy. The techniques mentioned include alternative individualized programs, punishments (such as lowered grades) for absences, and rewards (such as parties or higher grades) for good attendance. Programs using student aides, counselors, welfare caseworkers, and student "buddies" are explained. Several studies are cited including one that suggested that high school truancy is related to other deviant behaviors. Another found that larger schools in urban areas have the highest absentee rates. (JM)

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Number 48, December 1979

THE BEST OF ERIC

ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management

Reducing Student Absenteeism

1 **Bartlett, Larry; Fitzsimmons, Robert; Miles, Carl; Olbrecht, Gayle; Scala, David;** and **Smith, Giles.** *Absences. A Model Policy and Rules.* Des Moines: Iowa State Department of Public Instruction, 1978. 17 pages. ED 162 433.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the average absenteeism on any given day is 8 percent — twice the rate expected from illness alone. Add to this the results of several recent studies showing correlations between attendance and achievement in school subject matter, and the importance of improving attendance becomes clear.

Successful attendance policies have several common features, state the authors of this committee report. They are clearly specific in their requirements and expectations, well publicized, and consistently and strongly enforced. Participation in the formulation of such policies is broadly based, involving administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Also, immediate followups on absences are made by letter, telephone, or other means.

Simply formulating a policy statement is not enough, the authors emphasize. The policy must be brought to life with rules that detail the policy's application to specific circumstances. Following their own advice, the authors devote a few paragraphs to policy and philosophy and several pages to the rules themselves.

The rules cover such areas as attendance notification of parents, what can and cannot be considered a legitimate absence, provisions for makeup work, procedures for disciplinary measures in the case of continued unexcused absences, truancy officer appointments and responsibilities, and review procedures when a student or parent requests a reconsideration of a teacher's or principal's decision.

The authors comment on many of the rules and leave blanks where numbers of days or absences need to be specified. A bibliography contains thirty references to research studies pertaining to the attendance-achievement relationship.

2 **Bolds, Gloria S.** *Reducing Truancy by Using Student Aides in the Attendance Office.* 1977. 31 pages. ED 146 493.

In a survey of schools in Prince Georges County (Maryland), Bolds found that administrators were overburdened by their many duties and had little time left for attendance matters. As a result, parents were not consistently notified when their children were absent, and teachers were not given consistent feedback on the legality of student absences.

At Bethune Junior High, where Bolds is vice-principal, the problem was first addressed by using parental volunteers in the attendance office. But parental help, though welcome, turned out to be too inconsistent. Finally, a student aide program was implemented that, according to Bolds, worked quite well.

Students were able to work for either academic credit or for pay, with the money coming from a county youth employment agency. This agency stipulated that the participants come from low-income families and be at least fourteen years old. Participants were selected by the guidance department and by the school's work-study coordinator and were trained by the administrative staff.

Duties included sorting attendance forms, typing up absentee bulletins for distribution to teachers, calling and typing letters to parents, using the school's copying machine, and contacting teachers through the school's P.A. system.

The benefits of using student aides are many, says Bolds. Students gain valuable work experience, improve their communication skills, and become acquainted with the operational procedures of the school. In addition, students are consistently available and often have information about other students that adults do not have.

3 **Brimm, Jack L.; Forgety, John;** and **Sadler, Kenneth.** "Student Absenteeism: A Survey Report." *NASSP Bulletin,* 62, 415 (February 1978), pp. 65-69. EJ 173 495.

What do Tennessee high school principals think of student absenteeism? According to this survey report, most believe that absenteeism can be reduced by stricter enforcement of attendance policies; paradoxically, however, most also believe that "enforcement of existing attendance laws contributes to the absentee problem by confining the unwilling learner."

Most of the respondents indicated that too much administrative time is spent on attendance matters. On the other hand, 40 percent felt that the importance of regular attendance is not emphasized enough by the schools.

The three primary causes of absenteeism were thought to be compulsory attendance laws, the decrease of parental control, and changes in the students' attitudes toward school and authority in general. Solutions to the problem, however, were harder to identify.

Stricter enforcement of the attendance requirement and changes in parental and student attitudes were common responses. But

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there was also a strong sentiment that "schools should develop and implement an alternative curriculum for the chronic absentee and that class schedules should be flexible enough to permit students to attend school and work part-time."

The authors also present a few of their own suggestions for reducing absenteeism. For example, special programs and events could be presented regularly on Mondays and Fridays, when absenteeism is greatest, to "entice students to delay their plans for an extended weekend." Changes could be made in the curriculum, too, to make school more interesting. Credit could be given for work done on a political campaign, on an environmental project, or in an office or clinic.

Finally, schools could survey students about absenteeism and find out just why they aren't attending. In the end, the underlying causes of absenteeism should be treated instead of just the obvious symptoms.

4 **De Leonibus, Nancy.** *Absenteeism: The Perpetual Problem. The Practitioner, Vol. V, No. 1.* Reston, Virginia: National Association of Secondary School Principals, October 1978. 13 pages. ED 162 424.

Student absenteeism is a persistent multifaceted problem caused by a variety of personal, family, community, and school factors. De Leonibus compares the problem to an immortal, multiheaded monster that no amount of administrative action can conquer. So, she advises, "Be satisfied with small victories in the battle for good attendance."

A recent study in a Connecticut high school found that even a very strict attendance policy will meet with only partial success. The author of this study concluded that "additional strategies for attendance beyond restrictive or punitive rules should be devised" to improve student attendance.

Incentive programs, too, have had mixed results. One that has worked for an Iowa high school involves a "10 percent grade bonus for students with perfect attendance for a 45-day grading period." One absence earns a 9 percent bonus, two an 8 percent bonus, down to zero for 10 absences or more. Administrators should check state codes before implementing such a program, however, because certain states (such as Washington) outlaw the lowering of a student's grades solely on the basis of absenteeism or tardiness.

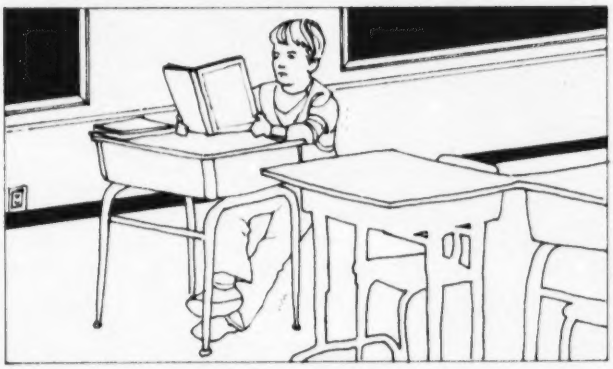
Perhaps the most useful part of this publication is its descriptions of several varied attendance programs that have proved effective in reducing absenteeism. One school in Massachusetts, for example, asks parents to sign one of two contracts. The first requires the parents to provide a note to the school after an absence, and it specifies that parents be notified *only* when attendance becomes problematic. The second contract requires parents to notify the school the morning of a student's absence. If the student is absent and no call has been received, the school calls the parents. Attendance has increased from 89 to 93 percent since this plan's implementation.

5 **Educational Research Service.** *Student Absenteeism. ERS Report.* Arlington, Virginia: 1977. 52 pages. ED 143 096.

An excellent introduction to the problem of student absenteeism, this exhaustive report reviews research on the phenomenon and chronicles sixteen successful programs to improve attendance used in schools across the nation.

The research review presents a number of basic studies (one reveals that attendance is related significantly to parent's occupation) as well as some rather unusual findings (maternal employment, for example, appears to have no influence on student absenteeism). Several of the studies reviewed are also summarized in this issue of The Best of ERIC.

One study found that absences of eleven-year-olds of upper and



middle class background did not correlate with achievement or ability, yet eleven-year-olds of other social classes who are frequently absent score poorly in achievement. A number of studies indicate that positive reinforcement can be used successfully to reduce absentee rates.

Most of the sample programs to improve attendance are explained in some detail, and many include samples of forms or letters used in the programs. A Boulder program recognizes different levels of student maturity by allowing teachers to make individual contracts with students concerning attendance requirements. Those who are mature enough to work independently are not required to attend every class.

Two programs based in New Orleans and Michigan provide alternative programs for chronically absent students who are dissatisfied with the regular program or performing poorly academically. Both programs are individualized and provide weekly problem-solving groups. Both programs, like the other fourteen programs described in this report, claim significant improvements in attendance.

6 **Fiordaliso, Richard; Lordeman, Ann; Filipczak, James;** and **Friedman, Robert M.** "Effects of Feedback on Absenteeism in the Junior High School." *Journal of Educational Research,* 70, 4 (March-April 1977), pp. 188-92. EJ 165 044.

As part of the PREP (Preparation through Responsive Educational Programs) research project, an experimental group of low-achievement students was given special attention by the attendance office. Parents of experimental group children received phone calls and letters more immediately than did parents of control group children and, in addition, received positive feedback when their children improved their attendance. Although average attendance of this group actually decreased by about half a day from the previous year, in a control group the attendance decreased by three days in the same period. The special attention provided by the attendance office took about forty-five extra minutes of staff time per day for the thirty students in the experimental group.

Another low-achievement group in the PREP research project attended an "intensive social skill training" class one period each day as well as six regular classes. The attendance of this group improved from an average of fourteen absences the first year of the program to eleven absences the second year, though no special attendance procedure was used.

The authors note that "the special procedures of the attendance program were not adequate for students with high degrees of absence the previous year": the three poorest attenders got worse over the course of the study. The authors also point out that the experimental group members were also enrolled in a special "academic phase" of the PREP project, in which they attended individualized reading, math, and English classes each day. Thus, it is difficult to determine "to what extent the specific effects of the

attendance program may be separated from the general effects of involvement in the PREP program."

7 **Fotinos, Tom.** *Napa High School Attendance Policy. An Experiment to Reduce Unnecessary School Absences.* 1975. 13 pages. ED 119 353.

In response to a continuing absenteeism rate of 8 to 10 percent, the faculty and administration of Napa (California) High School formulated a new and comprehensive attendance policy. Among the new provisions were an independent study program for chronic truants, explicitly stated rules and policies on attendance, and a policy linking minimum attendance with the earning of course credit. The latter provision—which is illegal in some states—was designed to "place more of the responsibility for attendance on the student by making the earning of credit directly contingent on his regular attendance."

The attendance policy designates twelve days' absence per semester as the maximum allowed under normal circumstances. With thirteen or more absences for any class period, "the student risks forfeiture of course credit in that class and can be dropped from class enrollment." Appeals can be made to an Attendance Review Board.

After four, eight, and twelve days of absence from any class period, the teacher of that class is required to complete an attendance report form that is sent to parents. The teacher counsels the student after the fourth absence, whereas after the eighth and twelfth absences both the teacher and an administrator or counselor talk to the student. Also after the eighth absence, a phone call is made to the parent by the teacher or counselor.

In the independent study program designed for problem attenders, the emphasis is placed on the "affective domain of education." Students' interests are assessed, and then efforts are made to help students establish goals and a positive self-image. After less than a year of operation, the absenteeism rate at Napa High was down 50 percent, to between 4 and 5 percent.

8 **Grala, Christopher,** and **McCauley, Clark.** "Counseling Truants Back to School: Motivation Combined with a Program for Action." *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 23, 2 (March 1976), pp. 166-69. EJ 134 273.

"There are three common approaches to persuading people to change their behavior: threat, promise, and instruction." In this well-constructed study, Grala and McCauley investigated the influences of these three factors in getting thirty-two chronic male truants in an inner-city Philadelphia neighborhood back to school.

The experimenters, who worked in a community center frequented by the truants, divided the black and Puerto Rican subjects into groups of eight. Each individual—not knowing he was the subject of an experiment—was approached by the same experimenter, who "was thought to be a credible communicator" for the subjects, because "he had himself been raised in a ghetto area" and because he knew each subject personally as a member of the center staff.

One group received both "threat communication" in the form of a graphic portrayal of the life awaiting the dropout (arrests, street gang violence, prison, drug use, poverty) as well as "supportive instruction" that included counseling on school problems, an offer by the experimenter to accompany the student back to school to talk to counselors and principal, and an offer of individual tutoring and use of the community center for doing homework. A second group received only the threat communication.

Members of the third group were given "optimistic appeal" talks on the "present and future benefits of attending school regularly" as well as the same supportive instruction as group one. Group four received only the optimistic appeal talk.

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After four weeks of monitoring school attendance, the group receiving both optimistic appeal and supportive instruction improved the most in attendance, with three members maintaining perfect attendance through the fourth week. Threat appeal with instruction also had a positive influence on attendance, though not as great. Threat appeal alone had a small transient effect, whereas optimistic appeal alone had no apparent effect.

9 **Johnson, Janis Tyler.** "A Truancy Program: The Child Welfare Agency and the School." *Child Welfare*, 55, 8 (September-October 1976), pp. 573-80. EJ 151 818.

In 1973, Pennsylvania's new Juvenile Act went into effect, redefining truant children as "deprived" rather than "delinquent." Schools thus lost the leverage of the juvenile court system for getting truants back into school and instead had to rely on the rehabilitation and counseling efforts of social welfare agencies. Johnson here describes how the Lancaster County Bureau of Children's Services dealt with the newly defined population of deprived children left on its doorstep.

The first step the bureau took in handling truancy cases was to hold a school conference with the student, the parents, and school personnel in which the caseworker "helped the participants define the problem and formulate a plan to improve the student's attendance." It soon became obvious that the conference alone was doing a great deal of good: about 30 percent of those students that returned to school did so without any further intervention.

For the remaining truants, four major problem areas were identified—school, family, psychological, and social. Where the problem was one of the student feeling disconnected from school, the bureau attempted to "meet the student's needs in school through creative alternative school programs." In some cases, when the student was age sixteen, the bureau provided employment counseling for the student.

Where the problem was familial in nature, the bureau lined up family counseling through the community Family Service Agency. If psychological problems seemed to be the cause of the truancy, the caseworker "initiated and followed through a referral to the

Community Mental Health Service." And when peer pressure was diverting students away from school, both the school and the bureau attempted to "connect the student with more positive peer groups."

10 **Reynolds, Carol.** "Buddy System Improves Attendance." *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling*, 11, 4 (April 1977), pp. 305-306. EJ 158 417

The results of a "buddy system" attendance program fully support Reynold's contention that "positive reinforcement when middle/junior high school pupils improve their attendance is one of the best counseling techniques available."

To start the program, the pupil services staff identified the pupils with chronic absenteeism. A social worker took responsibility for the worst pupils, and approximately thirty other students were assigned to the program. Each of these students was asked to choose a buddy—"someone who lived close to them or someone who had a telephone to call them." If the buddy was willing to participate, the pair would check in with the counselor aide each morning, and the aide would record their attendance.

Before beginning the program, the students attended a "motivator party" given by the counseling staff. After six weeks of recording attendance, pairs of buddies that improved their attendance received awards of record albums, picnics, or pizza parties. Reynolds reports that attendance in this group has shown "marked improvement."

One substantial factor in the success of the program, says Reynolds, was the personality of the counselor aide who was "warm, pleasant, and empathetic." In addition to providing positive reinforcement to the students for good attendance, the aide contacted the students' parents when attendance started to drop.

11 **Robins, Lee Nelken,** and **Ratcliff, Kathryn Strother.** *Long Range Outcomes Associated with School Truancy*. 1978. 35 pages. ED 152 893.

Is school truancy a predictor of deviant behavior in later life? To answer this question, Robins and Ratcliff chose a random sample of one thousand black St. Louis schoolboys and compared their school attendance records with their later adult behavior, as evidenced by police, hospital, employment, and other records. The subjects—all born between 1930 and 1934—were interviewed in the 1960s as part of another study the authors conducted.

One conclusion drawn by the authors was that elementary school truancy—often beginning in the first grade—was a good predictor of high school truancy. Few boys developed truancy after elementary school unless they began other deviant behaviors at the same time. Both elementary and high school truancy predicted incompletion of high school and low adult earnings. And high school truancy was related to a variety of adult deviant behaviors, such as violent behaviors, employment problems, and disciplinary problems in the military.

Another interesting finding was that men who had been truant in elementary school tended to marry women who were similarly truant, and these couples tended to produce truant sons and daughters.

Truancy, the authors note, is often the first deviant childhood behavior to develop and is also readily detectable in routinely kept school records. Thus, intervention at the first sign of truancy may help avert the development of a lifelong pattern of deviant behavior.

12 **Wright, John S.** "Student Attendance: What Relates Where?" *NASSP Bulletin*, 62, 415 (February 1978), pp. 115-17. EJ 173 504.

In response to poor attendance in the state's high schools, the Virginia Legislature in 1974 commissioned a study of attendance and its relationship to various school, curriculum, and staff characteristics. Many "statistically significant relationships" were found.

The strongest correlation was between population density and attendance rate: urban schools consistently had the poorest attendance, suburban schools had a better rate, and schools in "other areas" had the best. Larger schools, in general, had poorer attendance.

In the urban schools, the strongest correlation was between attendance and the ages of the staff. Younger staffs had better attendance. Also, schools with relatively more teachers had better attendance.

Another interesting finding was that, in general, the more freedom and choice given to students, the better was their attendance. For example, in urban schools attendance was better at "those schools which offered a higher percentage of their state required courses in the form of phase electives." In both urban and suburban areas, those schools with work programs had higher attendance rates. And in suburban schools, "the more freedom of campus ingress and egress allowed students during normal school hours, the better the attendance."

In the curriculum area, the urban schools that offered more music classes had better attendance, as did the suburban schools that offered more health and physical education classes. Schools offering more of their courses as nine-week courses had better attendance than those offering a higher percentage of year-long courses.

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Besides processing documents and journal articles, the Clearinghouse prepares bibliographies, literature reviews, monographs, and other interpretive research studies on topics in its educational area.

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